



## **Testimony of Casey Family Programs**

Hearing on Racial Disproportionality in Foster Care  
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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. I am Oronde Miller, Senior Director of Systems Improvement at Casey Family Programs. Casey Family Programs thanks you for the invitation to testify today before the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Supports about promising state and community based programs and policies to address racial disproportionality in child welfare. We thank you for your continued commitment to address the issue of racial disparities. It is a challenging issue, but one that must be addressed.

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused solely on providing, improving and ultimately preventing the need for foster care. The foundation draws on over 40 years of experience and expert research and analysis to improve the lives of children and youth in foster care in two important ways: by providing direct services and supports to children and families involved in foster care, and by promoting improvements in child welfare practice and policy. In 2005 Casey began a 15-year strategic vision that we call our 2020 Strategy for Children.

As a nation, we need to take action to better care for our vulnerable children. If nothing changes in the United States between 2005 and 2020:

- 22,500 children will die from child abuse and neglect.
- Nearly 14 million children will be confirmed as victims of abuse or neglect.
- 9 million more children will experience foster care.
- 300,000 youth will age out of foster care, most with inadequate supports to build successful adult lives.
- Most of these children are children of color.

Our 2020 Strategy calls for a comprehensive change of foster care and the child welfare system. Casey's 2020 Strategy seeks to safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by the year 2020 and reinvest savings to improve the well being of children and their families, especially in the areas of education, employment, and mental health.

As part of our strategic efforts, we are investing two billion dollars of our own endowment to improve outcomes for children who are at risk or are already involved in the child welfare system. We are partnering with states, tribes and local communities to provide technical assistance and share promising approaches to help them address many of the challenges that plague child welfare systems. We recognize that in order to reach our 2020 goals for children and families, strategies to address issues of racial disparities must be integrated into all efforts to reform the current child welfare system. Some of our work directly addresses racial disproportionality. For instance, Casey Family Programs, in collaboration with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Services, and the Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare, sponsored a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on "Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System" to help jurisdictions identify key components of change to reduce and ultimately eliminate these disparities. In addition, we have partnered with states and counties including the Texas

Child Protective Services (CPS) system to address systemic factors and identify and implement practice improvements that can address the disproportional representation and disparate outcomes of children of color and their families. Casey Family Programs also is proud to be part of the Casey/CSSP Alliance on Racial Equity in Child Welfare (Alliance). One critical element of the Alliance's work is to identify locations or sites across the country, where work is being done to promote racial equity and improve outcomes for children of color in child welfare.

Some of the work we do is designed to reform child welfare more generally but has a particularly significant impact on children of color. We believe that both types of activities are necessary if we are to effectively address racial disparities in child welfare. Efforts to address racial disproportionality within states and local jurisdictions also often take this dual approach. Targeted acts to address cultural and racial bias must be accompanied by more global efforts to address the needs of all children in care or who are at risk of coming into care.

Through our work with the BSC sites, our partnerships with states and communities throughout the country and our efforts as part of the Alliance, Casey Family Programs has identified several promising and effective practices and policies to address racial disproportionality. As I highlight the initiatives in Texas and other jurisdictions, I will describe some of the policies that enabled them to intentionally address racial disproportionality. My remarks will conclude by noting what changes in federal policy can help more states to engage in effective and promising approaches.

## **The Texas Approach and Experience**

A number of states have begun to identify and address racial disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children and families of color. In fact a number of these states are represented on this panel today. Texas is one state that has been particularly comprehensive and innovative in their scope of work.

Casey Family Programs has worked in Texas for a number of years, providing direct services to many children in foster care, supporting families and communities involved in the child welfare system, and providing strategic consulting to improve the state's child welfare system. A large focus of this relationship has been to reduce racial disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children and families of color involved with Texas' foster care system as part of our overarching goal of improving the child welfare system for all children.

The Texas experience illustrates six core elements of a successful effort to address racial disproportionality in child welfare:

- 1) **Building Political Will to Reform the Child Welfare System Overall with a Focus on Prevention and Early Intervention** – Understanding and addressing racial disproportionality and disparate outcomes formally became a central component of the Texas child welfare system reform efforts in 2005, although the

work to make this happen began much earlier. It is important to point out the policy and political context in which these changes occurred. After a number of tragic child welfare cases, the child welfare agency, state legislature and Governor committed to improving the entire child protective services system with both improved policies that focused on prevention and a substantial increase in resources. The redesign added significant resources which reflected a strong political commitment to improving safety for all children and increased supports for relative caregivers. These additional resources and the following programmatic initiatives have produced significant results. For the first time in seven years, the number of children entering foster care in Texas decreased. Although there was a reduction in the total number of children entering care, the impact was greater in the jurisdictions where the state had focused its disproportionality efforts, particularly in the areas where they targeted community engagement.

- 2) **Data Driven Planning** – This political climate created an opportunity for child welfare agencies to talk about disproportionality. They were able to include this issue as part of the larger discussion on child welfare reform because they had begun collecting and analyzing data about disproportionality in child welfare years before the reform efforts began. Their research found that, even after controlling for factors such as poverty, children of color were more likely to enter care and fare worse once in care. The data was incontrovertible: patterns of poor outcomes for children of color in the Texas child welfare system was a result of historic patterns of inequity and racism that disadvantaged children, families and communities of color. Armed with this information and with the support and leadership of the executive and legislative branch, child welfare officials committed to make a cultural shift within the state child protective services system. Strategies to address racial disproportionality and disparate outcomes must begin with an analysis of data, specifically disaggregated by race and ethnicity at each of the critical decision points in a child and family's involvement with the child welfare system. In addition, data should be collected by age and gender, taking into consideration the characteristics of the population, analyzed by region, office and even supervisory unit level whenever possible. This level of data allows states to target their response and prioritize interventions. Casey Family Programs supported research conducted by Chapin Hall Center for Children, which found that age is a critical factor in racial disproportionality in child welfare. They report that both placement and disparity rates are consistently higher for infants. They also found that these disparities at the county level vary in relation to characteristics of the population. Data analysis has guided Texas CPS efforts to identify problem areas and needed practice and policy changes. Data-driven planning ensures that the actions taken are relevant (both internal to DFPS/CPS and external to the community) and verifies that outcomes are indeed linked to changes in practice, policy or programming.
- 3) **Leadership Development** – Texas child welfare officials were committed to operationalizing a values-based leadership approach. Anti-racism initiatives and

a fundamental commitment to families and communities was central to this approach. Child welfare managers and staff evaluated how their own practices and day-to-day decisions affected outcomes for children of color in care as well as their families. Part of their leadership development involved learning to lead from a position of values and character, and a commitment to shape future outcomes through immediate acts. The values underlying Texas CPS leadership activity are intended to guide leaders towards humane practices and policies in their behavior with staff, youth, families, and others.

- 4) **Community Engagement Model** – External stakeholders are actively engaged in the Texas approach to address racial disproportionality. This engagement model is based on the understanding that community members are best equipped to create solutions that work for their specific needs; that stakeholder buy-in is necessary for intervention success; and that their involvement is critical to sustain change over time. In Texas, there are essentially four components that define the community engagement model:
  - a. *Community Awareness and Engagement*—Making the problem and issues visible, sharing the data, telling the story with the media and with constituents, enrolling community leaders, and building local allies.
  - b. *Community Leadership*—Expanding the leadership beyond organizations/institutions to the level where it belongs, that is, at the community level. Participation in *Undoing Racism* training is available to reinforce the committee members as agents of social change.
  - c. *Community Organization*—Going to the community, being guided by it to learn what its strengths are, and hearing from residents while bringing them to the table as key informants to address their issues.
  - d. *Community Accountability*—Working towards desired outcomes and measurable results to achieve the ultimate goal of sustainability, and ensuring that communities own the solutions.
- 5) **Creating a Culturally Competent Workforce** – Developing a culturally competent workforce has included both training and skills development of current CPS personnel as well as efforts to create a diverse workforce. Trainings primarily involved the *Undoing Racism* workshop and the *Knowing Who You Are* training developed by Casey Family Programs. The state legislature appropriated funds to hire five disproportionality specialists to help move their remediation plan forward across the state.
- 6) **Targeted Recruitment of Foster and Adoptive Families** – Texas has increased targeted recruitment efforts for foster and adoptive parents who can meet the needs of children and youth who are waiting for permanent homes, including an expansion of the Department’s faith-based effort and One Church, One Child programs. This effort has sought to decrease the number of African American children waiting for permanent homes.

Much of the work for Texas child welfare reform has been strengthened by clear and assertive leadership at both the legislative and executive branches of state government. The state legislature was very actively involved in guiding the work of this system reform effort, and developed clear accountability guidelines and requirements in Texas state law. In partnership with Casey Family Programs, Texas child welfare officials have chronicled their efforts to reduce and eliminate racial disproportionality and disparate outcomes in a publication entitled, *Engaging Communities in Taking a Stand for Children and Families*, and its accompanying Executive Summary. I would like to submit for the record a copy of this report as an attachment to my written testimony.

### **Additional Examples of Emerging and Promising State and Local Practice and Policy:**

Cross Systems Partnership: Child Welfare and Public School Systems – Several jurisdictions including Ramsey County, MN, Guilford County, NC, and the state of Connecticut have developed effective partnerships between their respective child welfare and public school systems. In these jurisdictions social workers have completed intensive training of school personnel on mandatory reporting responsibilities and procedures and co-located social workers in schools with the highest rates of CPS referrals. Co-location allows workers to identify children and families in need of additional supports before families enter the child welfare system. This cross system collaboration prevents unnecessary child welfare system involvement.

Private Agency Performance Based Contracting and Accountability – In Jefferson County, KY, the public child welfare agency developed and implemented a system of performance based contracting and accountability that included a data driven focus on racial disparities and cultural responsiveness in services for children and families. Private agencies and other community based organizations with public agency contracts are now required to report outcomes for children and families, including the provision of services to children and families (timeliness and effectiveness) by race and ethnicity of service providers and recipients. Organizations must demonstrate effectiveness in culturally responsive practice, an outcome data-driven determination, in order to maintain their contractual relationship with the public agency.

Identification and Engagement of Fathers, Paternal Relatives and Members of the Extended Family Support Network in Case Planning and Decision Making Process – A number of public child welfare agencies, including those in Wake County and Guilford County, NC and Des Moines, IA, realized that they had not done an effective job of identifying fathers and/or subsequently engaging them or their extended family in the discussion about their child's well-being and potential involvement in the foster care system. As a result, agencies developed formal protocols for social workers to follow in an effort to first identify fathers, and for engaging them in the case planning and subsequent decision making process regarding their children. Agencies also developed additional support programs aimed at educating fathers on how to most effectively navigate the foster care and related human service systems.

### Identification of Community Based Organizations and Family Support Resources Available to Assist Families

– According to the most recent federal data available, nearly one out of four children who enters foster care exits in less than six months. This suggests that many of these placements could have been prevented in the first place. However, with few home and community based resources available or known to the child welfare agencies, children and families unnecessarily endure the trauma of foster care involvement. This is particularly pervasive in communities of color. Several public child welfare agencies, including those in Connecticut, dedicated the time of one or more social workers to go into the community and identify existing resources. Connecticut child welfare staff compiled this information providing descriptions of the organizations, services offered and contact information. They then distributed this information to social services personnel, schools and other child and family serving professionals, as well as families. The community resource directories are continually updated and made available so that community members, including mandatory reporters, have information needed to refer families to the appropriate support resources when needed and appropriate.

Parent Advocate Programs – A number of jurisdictions, including Jefferson County, KY have begun to develop formal programs that match mothers and fathers, who were once involved with the foster care system, with mothers and fathers who are currently involved with the child welfare system. This approach provides support to parents attempting to navigate what is frequently a frightening, painful and very traumatic process. Research shows that when parents participate in this type of program, children experience higher rates of reunification, spend less time in foster care, experience fewer placement moves while in care, and are more likely to be placed with and/or maintain significant levels of contact with their immediate and extended family members while in care.

Deliberate and Thoughtful Engagement of Foster Youth, Alumni of Foster Care, and Birth Parents with Foster Care System Involvement in Ongoing Systems Improvement Efforts – Several public child welfare agencies, including those in Jefferson County, KY, Des Moines, IA, and Connecticut have developed effective methods of engaging youth, alumni of care, and birth parents. Their involvement has sensitized child welfare professionals to the experience of families negotiating the child protective and foster care systems, and has provided child welfare professionals with practical strategies for improving family engagement as well as youth and family compliance with case plans. Strategies include: the development of youth and birth parent boards and constituent organizations; involvement in agency training and professional development activities; testimony at agency and local government child welfare hearings; and agency reform-focused community organizing roles.

Community Outreach, Organizing and Cultural Responsiveness Strategies - Poor and sometimes hostile relationships often emerge between the predominantly Caucasian public child welfare agency workforce and the various communities of color. In Ramsey County, MN the public agency leadership developed a strategy of employing “cultural consultants” to bridge the mutual level of trust, understanding and responsiveness

between the agency and the various cultural communities. The cultural consultants organized and facilitated hearings and discussion forums within the child welfare agency as well as within the community, and eventually between both. These forums and information exchange opportunities allowed for more transparency and cooperation between agency personnel and community members. Ultimately these strategies resulted in more thoughtful and sustained engagement of family members, as well as faith and civic organizations in prevention and direct family support activities. This also led to sustained opportunities for community participation in ongoing child welfare system improvement efforts.

In Woodbury County, IA, the Minority Youth and Family Initiative (MYFI) Special Native American Project Team (SNAP), created in 2004 to meet the needs of children and families in out of home care, provides active efforts to all children self-identified as American Indian. The SNAP team consists of a Supervisor, Native family liaison, Native tribal liaison and social workers. Through efforts of CINCF, team efforts have expanded to include collaborations with child protective and adoptions workers. Because SNAP team members and other local DHS staff are partners in the collaboration, SNAP efforts continue to grow and improve. Some goals of SNAP include working with relatives from the onset of placement, connecting with tribes early and often, and the involvement of the Native Liaisons from the onset of a child protective services case.

This is only a small snapshot of the exciting and promising work being done at the state and local level to address racial disproportionality in child welfare. The Alliance has created a network of state and local leaders to continue the shared learning of the BSC initiative. State leaders in more than 10 states and counties have committed to share effective strategies with one another. Per your request, we will continue to share these lessons with this Subcommittee.

### **Federal Policy Recommendations:**

1. Invest federal resources in prevention activities that keep children safely out of foster care.
2. Improve efforts to locate relatives and engage them in placement decisions that serve the best interests of the child. When family members are identified and engaged in all aspects of service delivery, the outcomes for all children are significantly improved. This is especially true for children of color.
3. Federal child welfare funds should support a range of permanency options, including reunification, adoption, and guardianship. Currently, federal funds support one form of permanency: adoption. The adoption assistance program provides financial supports to families who adopt eligible children from foster care and the adoption incentive program provides financial rewards to states that increase the number of children adopted from foster care over and above an established baseline. Support should also be available for children who exit foster care through reunification or guardianship. These modifications to funding



should provide states with incentives to move children out of foster care for a full range of permanency options. In addition, federal funds should provide a full array of post-permanency services and supports to families, whenever a child exits foster care through reunification, adoption or guardianship, in order to ensure that a child remains safely in his or her permanent home. These provisions benefit all children in care. They are especially essential for children of color by strengthening the ability of extended family members and kin to provide permanent, loving homes for children when their biological parents are unable to do so.

4. Grant Indian tribes and native children and families equal access to all federal child welfare supports. In too many states, native children are placed in foster care at rates 4-5 times greater than their proportion of the population. Tribal child welfare systems are disadvantaged by the way that federal child welfare funding is provided for child welfare services. Tribes are not allowed to directly receive federal Title IV-E foster care funds, and, as a result, their ability to provide the necessary care and services for vulnerable children and their families is severely limited. Currently funds must be negotiated with the state in which the tribe is located. This pass-through approach is cumbersome, costly to tribes and inconsistently applied across states. American Indian/Alaskan Native children in the care of tribal social services agencies should receive direct federal child welfare support by allowing Indian tribes to have direct access to Title IV-E funding.
5. Allow federal training dollars to be used to train the full continuum of workers who work with children and families who come to the attention of child welfare. Most states contract with private non-profit agencies to provide many child welfare services. In addition, many systems outside the child welfare agencies serve and impact the children and families involved in child welfare. However, current federal law limits the use of training funds to only public agency workers.
6. Collect data on the disproportionate representation of children of color in all stages of child welfare involvement at the federal level and require states to have in place a plan to collect such data at the state and regional level. In addition, mandate that states create a plan in collaboration with key stakeholders including families, birth parents, alumni of foster care, courts and other child and family serving agencies to address any disparities that are revealed.

We applaud this Subcommittee and the House for passing H.R. 6307, which includes provisions that address a number of these recommendations.

In closing, as I participate here today I do so with the strong belief that change is possible and that the outcomes that we seek can be achieved – but time is of the essence. On average, each day in America, approximately 800 children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care, approximately half of those children were

children of color. I thank you for seeking real change on their behalf, for having the courage to address the issue of racial disproportionality in child welfare and for seeking to learn about what is working at the state and local level. I also thank you again Mr. Chairman, Congressman Weller, and Subcommittee members for the opportunity to share Casey Family Programs' perspective with you today. Casey Family Programs is available as a resource to the Subcommittee, or to individual members, for more specific data, best practices or technical assistance as you continue to pursue policy solutions to this issue.

Thank you.